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Meeting of Council on Agrarian Reform

I attended a meeting of a temporary "Council on Agrarian Reform" this morning at the invitation of the Secretary of State for Agrarian Reform. (Ordinance 57 specifies that such a council will be established, but the President has not yet ratified the Secretary's nominations. As a result, the council met without formal sanction. The council was formed of the ranking administrative personnel of the Department, chaired by the Secretary.)

The principal decision reached by the group was to begin to secure landlord declarations of ownership. To this end, the Council proposed to arrange for immediate publicity via newspapers, radio, wall posters, and any other available mass communications channels to explain Ordinance 57 and the requirement that landlords declare their ownership. About two weeks after this campaign has begun, landlords will be sent letters informing them they must declare their holdings and the area they wish to retain. They will be given a deadline by which they must reply, but this deadline was not determined by the meeting. It appeals to me the period probably will be about a month, making the declarations due about the end of February. I was concerned, however, at how little attention was paid to the problem of checking the landlord returns for honesty; I shall work on this aspect.

Several other items were taken up but no decision reached. The group split on the problem of local administration, and appointed Mr. Ngo to formulate a local organization in consultation with me. The problem revolves around how much volunteer help can be expected, and since Mr. Ngo is an advocate of more, rather than less, use of volunteer help, I felt his appointment presaged a sensible choice to extend the use of local volunteers as far as possible. Another problem was that of assigning plots in one village to farmers from other villages; this seems a minor problem to me. I doubt if many villages have more land than local buyers. The group also discussed the operation of the special account for Agrarian Reform and its operation, a purely routine explanation of the regulations.

The meeting was a whole evidenced the Minister's determination to make some sort of obvious move at the earliest possible time. I hope they do not move too quickly, because it can only mean it will be poorly planned. However, the normal slowness of events in this country is on my side this time, and I have made no issue of slowing down. I suspect we will have plenty of time to formulate plans; the only problem is to get them to do it. This morning's meeting was encouraging for this aspect alone, if no other.